

How to talk to your kids about set backs

The way parents speak to children about making mistakes shapes whether they view failure as part of learning or something unsafe, according to a [new University of Auckland study](#).

As a parent, psychology professor Elizabeth Peterson found the "gold" of the study was its identification of three 'conversational features' that are crucial in such conversations - a collaborative action plan, the mention of cognitive tools, and emotional support.



"The sense of 'we' in [these conversations] is really important. It's [giving the child] this idea that 'I have an emotion, I have a plan, and there's support behind me.'"

The study - which analysed recorded conversations between more than 200 mothers and their 8-year-old children after a recent setback - was published in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*.

Although rates of anxiety among children are high and many are easily overwhelmed by a mistake or instance of failure, many parents in the study didn't mention their child's emotional response at all.

"Going back about it, over a past event, the emotions just weren't discussed. And if they were discussed, they were sometimes dismissed, ie 'Oh, you're a bit silly to think that way'."

Over half of the recorded conversations did not include any discussion of a forward plan for the child, Peterson says, and a lot didn't mention resources such as reframing and cognitive regulatory strategies.

"If they only discussed an action plan without any kind of collaborative resources behind it, those kids tended to fear making mistakes more, probably, because there was that sense of isolation."

There's real value in equipping children, from an early age, with tools they can call on when they hit a setback, Peterson says.

Alongside this, it's helpful that parents convey the message that making mistakes is a normal part of the learning process.

"Mistakes are welcome. Mistakes can often be signals of where we need to go a bit deeper. It's about being curious about them."

"Often we think of learning as this ladder that we have to get better and better and better at something. But actual real learning, I like to think of it more as a tide coming in where we learn some stuff and then we have some struggles and we go backwards."

Education specialist James Nottingham's concept of the 'learning pit' as a place in which you can't avoid getting messy conveys this well for Peterson.

"It's going to be hard, it's going to be emotional, but if we practise and we persist and we work on it, we'll come out of that learning pit better than we were when we started ... We often have to jump in and get a bit mucky."

The home environment, where kids are not being watched by peers, is a really nice place for them to explore learning through failure without fear of judgement, Peterson says.

"If you make a mistake or you do something on the sports field it comes with all sorts of extra emotions ... Other people are reacting to you and then they're watching how you react to that so it's a very social, relational thing."



While many primary school classrooms are adorned with messages about the so-called growth mindset - "the idea that we can always get better at something" - it's actually parents' mindsets about failure which have much more effect on their children, she says.

"We don't necessarily mean to portray these things, but there's a sense that only right answers are good answers Kids pick up on these ideas, when parents think that failure is something to be avoided and not to be sort of reflected on.

"I suspect kids are learning from their parents' attitudes towards failure and that this is perhaps flowing over into their own perceptions of whether it's safe to make a mistake."

Listen to the full interview with Elizabeth Peterson [here](#)

Reference: www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/524005/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-setbacks